

Film Reviews

Marc-André Forcier's **Kalamazoo**

"You're innocent when you dream."
—Tom Waits

André Forcier works in a long tradition of film artists who see beauty in the anarchy of unleashed human emotions, no matter how ludicrous, grotesque, pathetic, or even debased they may be. In *L'Eau Chaude l'eau froide* (1976), the post-pubescent Francine and Ti-Guy (Louise Gagnon and Réjean Audet) make love on a potato sack, not far from the somewhat older Julien (Jean-Pierre Bergeron). While the lovers stir and sigh offscreen, we watch a very long take of Julien's morose face, a shifting landscape shadowed by fear, confusion, and finally ecstasy as he masturbates himself out of his loneliness and into his friends' hot little moment.

Simultaneously secretive and gregarious, Forcier insists in interviews that his sardonic, abrasive, sometimes darkly funny movies are essentially about the tender sacredness of human love, and that the stumblebums, lunatics, and other terminal losers who rant, rave, and drink their way through the films are lovable creatures, especially when they are nurturing their crazy dreams.

In *Au Clair de la lune* (1982), Albert (Guy L'Écuyer), a chubby little guy who longs to regain his past glory as the champion of a local bowling alley, has a close encounter with François (Michel Côté), an albino street freak who might be an angel from outer space. At the garish heart of this movie is a moment when "Bert," smiling radiantly while a tear slides down his cheek, gazes at François walking in the sky over the rooftops of a working-class neighborhood.

Full of wild energy, Forcier's characters get caught up in obsessive talk, irrational yearnings, and crackpot schemes. Living in ragtag rooming houses or in a "beau Chevrolet vert" half-buried by snow; hanging around laundromats and cheap bars, their lives are deprived, pathetic, and yet animated by nutty passions. Their universe is a million light years from Denys Arcand's smug, tastefully unhappy academics. In Yves Belanger and Marc-André Berthiaume's documentary *Forcier en attendant* (1988), someone says they show the "genius that can exist in misery."

Prolific in the '70s (*Bar Salon*, *Night Cap*, *L'Eau Chaude*), Forcier finished post-production for *Au Clair de la lune* at the NFB, where he became a "permanent" in 1982. Since then, during the years he has been a denizen of that institution's long grey halls, he has completed one film: *Kalamazoo*.

People tell stories about script problems, budget problems, personal problems, and battles with producers for final cut. Perhaps the



Rémy Girard (Felix Cotnoir) bumps into Tony Nardi (Pascal Globenski)

changing winds in Quebec's film industry made *Kalamazoo*'s history a turbulent one. The province's cinema, once known for its quirky, restless, sometimes unsettling personality, had begun to yearn for show-biz respectability and international marketability. One can easily invent scenarios about the picture's co-producers (the Film Board and a private house) reacting to a movie in which a lusty mermaid hobbles into a cheap hotel on crutches, swishing her fin across the carpet:

"A mermaid on crutches?"
"That's nothing. He seems to think the picture should have the rhythm of a six-ton whale lumbering through Arctic waters."
"Jesus Christ!"
"Don't say that; it makes me nervous."
"Why can't he do a fast, sexy comedy?"
"I don't think he's in touch with post-referendum Quebec."
"He certainly doesn't understand budgetary exigencies."

"People up there are breathing down my neck."
"We have only one solution: fight for control, drive him nuts, drag it out as long as possible and then —"
"—Blame him for all the delays!"

Six years after Forcier and his long time collaborator Jacques Marcotte (a man who looks like he just finished sipping jasmine tea with surrealist poets) completed the first version of the *Kalamazoo* script, the picture swam into view last November (and took the prestigious Ouimet-Molson award for best Quebec film of 1988 at the *Rendez-vous du cinéma Québécois* in February, '89).

As *Kalamazoo* opens, Felix Cotnoir (Rémy Girard), a retired botanist who types rhapsodic ramblings while driving his black Checker sedan (which, like many of the picture's settings, is festooned with yellow wildflowers), crashes into a telephone booth and meets Pasquale Globenski (Tony Nardi), an excitable Polish-Italian sign-painter.

Once Forcier has established some of his

favorite motifs — the crossed-wire romantic; the chance meeting between two men, one of whom has exotic origins — we discover that Pasquale is crazy about Helena Mentana (Marie Tifo), a writer recovering from the failure of her novel *Kalamazoo* on the French islands of Saint Pierre et Miquelon.

Like one of Truffaut's possessed lovers or Bunuel's obsessives, Felix immediately falls for Helena, reads her book, and memorizes every word of it. Exalted by the romance of romance, the aging bachelor lurches into the picture's next act, operatically proclaiming his absurd passion for a woman he has never met. His skeptical friends at the small hotel where he lives smirk and cackle, but soon they too catch the fever. The hotel's desk clerk, Jacques de la Durantaye (co-writer Jacques Marcotte), dyes his hair a blatantly tasteless reddish-blond hue, signifying he has also been reborn by love.

In *Kalamazoo*, Forcier has a casual, offhand approach to the miraculous. When the mermaid (also Marie Tifo) appears, she does so without any special fanfare or effects. Felix discovers her one night, lying in autumn leaves near a riverbank, the double of the enigmatic Helena.

Soon the mermaid is stretched out on Felix's hotel room bed in a sensuous *fin-de-siècle* pose, awaiting his reverential kiss. "I made love to a woman!" our Tati-esque hero announces the next day, but of course, the fact that she is all fish from the waist down, speaks with a man's voice (Felix's own), and sometimes suggests an insouciant drag queen, might have certain implications.

The picture grinds into its next gear when Felix, in the white uniform of a comic book admiral, and Pasquale, rapidly losing patience with his preposterous rival, are sailing toward Saint Pierre et Miquelon in search of Helena. The mermaid appears and disappears, and in one of the film's most effective sequences, Pasquale makes love to her in the sea while Felix desperately tries to plug up a hole in the sailboat

with wads of toilet paper. "Maman," the two men shout at the climactic moment; then the boat sinks as the mermaid's fin disappears into the moonlit water.

Kalamazoo's striking images (the d.o.p. was André Gagnon) and goofy humor make the movie pleasurable to watch. Forcier builds a dreamscape out of oddball locations, strongly contrasting colors, and a peculiar clutter of props and details. Sometimes, he evokes an atmosphere that flashes back to the poetic realism of '30s French movies and to silent comedy. In one sight gag, filmed in an artful long shot, Pasquale proclaims his love to Helena, on St. Miquelon's moody harbor, the camera turns, and we notice that his ass is sticking out of a white hospital gown.

However, when *Kalamazoo*'s enjoyable absurdities and luminous moments are over, you end up feeling that the film's best material is like icing that has been spread too thinly on a half-baked cake. The picture needs more invention, more surprises, more convolutions in its mock-mythic plot. A synopsis of *Kalamazoo* published in 1984 suggests a richer, more expansive (and expensive) film that gives the adventures of the mermaid/Helena Mentana character far more prominence. In the picture that he's made, Forcier tends to become mesmerized by his innocent male dreamers in excessively long takes and scenes that threaten to grind to a halt.

Marie Tifo gives a witty, ironic performance as the film's only woman, while Rémy Girard and Tony Nardi are deft as Felix and Pasquale. But compared to *Au Clair de la lune*'s haunted creatures, *Kalamazoo*'s buffoons look quaint and whimsical. The feeling for people trying to dream themselves out of loneliness and deprivation doesn't run as deep.

A romantic who sees the sacred in the profane, a practical joker who wants to provoke his audiences as he makes them laugh, Forcier in his new film tends to straddle the line between intentional and unintentional cutes.

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